

HOBBS AND THE ABSOLUTE STATE

Hobbes is the earliest, the most original, and the least English of our three great political thinkers. With his hard-shelled rationalism and his scorn of compromise he seems rather out of place in the land of the *juste milieu*, where we pride ourselves on our bad logic and our good feeling. By the middle of the seventeenth century the modern Englishman had emerged. His sturdy independence rejected the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, but he was quite ready to obey the laws framed by a freely elected Parliament. A kw-abiding individualist, he had as little taste for anarchy as for slavery. He was beginning to solve the problem of combining order with liberty. Hobbes argued that it could not be done. Locke, with the experience of the Revolution settlement to encourage him, asserted that it could. Burke, with a further century of evidence to guide him, confirmed Locke's verdict and discovered the secret in the blending of tradition with experiment.

Hobbes possessed an intellect of extraordinary power, sharp as a razor but of limited imaginative range. Living in an age of civil turmoil he mistook a distressing phenomenon for an incurable disease. Loving intellectual liberty as much as any of his contemporaries, he felt nevertheless that self-government was a prize beyond our grasp. Order was heaven's first law, and no price was too high to obtain it. Anarchy was a ferocious animal which could only be kept at bay by the lash of an autocrat. His mechanistic mind had no vision of organic development. His rules of government were simple enough, for they embodied his conception of the unchanging imperfections of human nature. Political theories, like political systems, reflect the ideology of

their authors
 like a face in a mirror. If we entertain a lofty
 view of the
 average man, of his ultimate sanity, of his
 capacity to learn
 from his mistakes, we impose on him the
 minimum of restraint
 If, on the other hand, we regard him, to use
 Taine's unflattering
 simile, as a chained gorilla, we keep him
 behind steel bars.
 The optimism of Grotius made him the pioneer of
 international
 law. The pessimism of Hobbes rendered him the
 father of
 totalitarianism. France of the absolute
 Monarchy, rather than
 Puritan England, was his spiritual home. He
 was neither
 Whig nor Tory, neither Conservative nor
 Liberal. Tradition